come as you are

The Surprising New Science that Will Transform Your Sex Life

Emily Nagoski, Ph.D.

sexual temperament questionnaire

Inhibitors (SIS)

Circle the number of the answer that best describes you.

Unless things are "just right," it is difficult for me to become sexually aroused.

0	1	2	3	4
Not at all like me	Not much like me	Somewhat like me	A lot like me	Exactly like me

When I am sexually aroused, the slightest thing can turn me off.

0	1	2	3	4
Not at all like me	Not much like me	Somewhat like me	A lot like me	Exactly like me

I *have* to trust a partner to become fully aroused.

0	1	2	3	4
Not at all like me	Not much like me	Somewhat like me	A lot like me	Exactly like me

If I am worried about taking too long to become aroused or to orgasm, this can interfere with my arousal.

0	1	2	3	4
Not at all like me	Not much like me	Somewhat like me	A lot like me	Exactly like me

Sometimes I feel so "shy" or self-conscious during sex that I cannot become fully aroused.

0	1	2	3	4
Not at all like me	Not much like me	Somewhat like me	A lot like me	Exactly like me

Total (out of 20) _____

Excitors (SES)

Circle the number of the answer that best describes you.

Often, just how someone smells can be a turn-on.

0	1	2	3	4
Not at all like me	Not much like me	Somewhat like me	A lot like me	Exactly like me

Seeing my partner doing something that shows their talent or intelligence, or watching them interacting well with others can make me very sexually aroused.

0	1	2	3	4
Not at all like me	Not much like me	Somewhat like me	A lot like me	Exactly like me

Having sex in a different setting than usual is a real turn-on for me.

0	1	2	3	4
Not at all like me	Not much like me	Somewhat like me	A lot like me	Exactly like me

When I think about someone I find sexually attractive or when I fantasize about sex, I easily become sexually aroused.

0	1	2	3	4
Not at all like me	Not much like me	Somewhat like me	A lot like me	Exactly like me

Certain hormonal changes (e.g., my menstrual cycle) definitely increase my sexual arousal.

0	1	2	3	4
Not at all like me	Not much like me	Somewhat like me	A lot like me	Exactly like me

I get very turned on when someone wants me sexually.

0	1	2	3	4
Not at all like me	Not much like me	Somewhat like me	A lot like me	Exactly like me

Total (out of 24) _____

Scoring

Low SIS (0–6)

You're not so sensitive to all the reasons not to be sexually aroused. You tend not to worry about your own sexual functioning, and body image issues don't interfere too much with your sexuality. When you're sexually engaged, your attention is not very distractible, and you aren't inclined to describe yourself as "sexually shy." Most circumstances can be sexual for you. You may find that your main challenge around sexual functioning is holding yourself back, reining yourself in. Staying aware of potential consequences can help with this. Around 15 percent of the women I've asked are in this range.

Medium SIS (7–13)

You're right in the middle, along with more than half the women I've asked. This means that whether your sexual brakes engage is largely dependent on context. Risky or novel situations, such as a new partner, might increase your concerns about your own sexual functioning, shyness, or distractibility from sex. Contexts that easily arouse you are likely to be low risk and more familiar, and anytime your stress levels—including anxiety, overwhelm, and exhaustion—escalate, your brakes will reduce your interest in and response to sexual signals.

High SIS (14–20)

You're pretty sensitive to all the reasons not to be sexually aroused. You need a setting of trust and relaxation in order to be aroused, and it's best if you don't feel rushed or pressured in any way. You might be easily

distracted from sex. High SIS, regardless of SES, is the most strongly correlated factor with sexual problems, so if this is you, pay close attention to the "sexy contexts" worksheets in the chapters that follow. About a quarter of the women I've asked fall into this range.

Low SES (0–7)

You're not so sensitive to sexually relevant stimuli and need to make a more deliberate effort to tune your attention in that direction. Novel situations are less likely than familiar ones to be sexy to you. Your sexual functioning will benefit from increasing stimulation (for instance, using a vibrator) and daily practice of paying attention to sensations. Lower SES is also associated with asexuality, so if you're very low SES, you might resonate with some components of the asexual identity. The women I ask are probably higher SES than the overall population—they're interested enough in sex to take a class, attend a workshop, or read a sex blog—but still about 8 percent of those women fall into this range.

Medium SES (8–15)

You're right in the middle, so whether you're sensitive to sexual stimuli probably depends on the context. In situations of high romance or eroticism, you tune in readily to sexual stimuli; in situations of low romance or eroticism, it may be pretty challenging to move your attention to sexual things. Recognize the role that context plays in your arousal and pleasure, and take steps to increase the sexiness of your life's contexts. Seventy percent of the women I've asked fall into this range.

High SES (16–24)

You're pretty sensitive to sexually relevant stimuli, maybe even to things most of us aren't generally very sensitive to, like smell and taste. A fairly wide range of contexts can be sexual for you, and novelty may be really exciting. You may like having sex as a way to de-stress—higher SES is correlated with greater risk for sexual compulsivity, so you may want to pay attention to the ways you manage stress. Make sure you create lots of time and space for your partner; because you're sensitive, you can derive intense satisfaction from your partner's pleasure, so you'll both benefit! About 16 percent of the women I ask fall into this group.

sexy contexts

Think of a positive sexual experience from your past. Describe it here, with as many relevant details as you can recall:

Now consider what aspects of that experience made it positive:

Category	Description
Mental and physical wellbeing	
• Physical health	_____
• Body image	_____
• Mood	_____
• Anxiety	_____
• Distractibility	_____
• Worry about sexual functioning	_____
• Other	_____
Partner characteristics	
• Physical appearance	_____
• Physical health	_____
• Smell	_____
• Mental state	_____
• Other	_____

Relationship characteristics

- Trust _____
- Power dynamic _____
- Emotional connection _____
- Feeling desired _____
- Frequency of sex _____

Setting

- Private/public (at home, work, _____
  vacation, etc.) _____
- Distance sex (phone, chat, etc.) _____
- See partner do something positive, _____
  like interact with family or do work _____

Other life circumstances

- Work-related stress _____
- Family-related stress _____
- Holiday, anniversary, "occasion" _____

Things you do

- Self-guided fantasy _____
- Partner-guided fantasy ("talking dirty") _____
- Body parts that were touched or not _____
- Oral sex on you/on partner _____
- Intercourse, etc. _____

Other

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Other

not-so-sexy contexts

Think of a not-so-great sexual experience from your past—not necessarily a terrible one, just a not-so-great one. Describe it here, with as many relevant details as you can recall:

Now consider what aspects of that experience made it not-so-great:

Category	Description
Mental and physical wellbeing	
• Physical health	_____
• Body image	_____
• Mood	_____
• Anxiety	_____
• Distractibility	_____
• Worry about sexual functioning	_____
• Other	_____
Partner characteristics	
• Physical appearance	_____
• Physical health	_____
• Smell	_____
• Mental state	_____
• Other	_____

Relationship characteristics

- Trust _____
- Power dynamic _____
- Emotional connection _____
- Feeling desired _____
- Frequency of sex _____

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- Private/public (at home, work, _____
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- Distance sex (phone, chat, etc.) _____
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  like interact with family or do work _____

Other life circumstances

- Work-related stress _____
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Things you do

- Self-guided fantasy _____
- Partner-guided fantasy ("talking dirty") _____
- Body parts that were touched or not _____
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• Worry about sexual functioning	_____
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• Smell	_____
• Mental state	_____
• Other	_____

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- Trust _____
- Power dynamic _____
- Emotional connection _____
- Feeling desired _____
- Frequency of sex _____

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Relationship characteristics

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Things you do

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- Body parts that were touched or not _____
- Oral sex on you/on partner _____
- Intercourse, etc. _____

Other

sexual cues assessment

Read through all your sexy and not-so-sexy contexts. What do you notice as reliable contexts for great sex and reliable contexts for not-so-great sex?

Contexts That Make Sex Great	Contexts That Make Sex Not-So-Great

Identify five things you and/or your partner could do if you decided to work toward creating more frequent and easier access to the contexts that improve your sexual functioning.

	Things to do	How much impact?	How easy?	How soon can you do it?
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				
5.				

Now select the two or three that feel like the right combination of impact, ease, and immediacy, and list all the things that would have to happen in order for this change to occur. Be as CONCRETE AND SPECIFIC as you can. These should be ACTIONS rather than abstractions or ideas or attitudes. Ask yourself, "If we decide to create this change, what goes on our to-do list?"

Change 1

Change 2

Change 3

Finally, select just one change that you will actually implement. Choose a start date together that feels like good timing. Ideally this will be within the next month. Make your plan. AND DO IT!

coping with stress

My three top stressors:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

How I can tell I'm stressed:

Physical Signs of Stress (e.g., digestive upset, jaw tension, etc.)	Emotional Signs of Stress (e.g., tearful, easily frustrated, etc.)	Cognitive Signs of Stress (e.g., distracted, unfocused, etc.)
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

When I'm feeling stressed, overwhelmed, or exhausted, here's what helps:

_____

_____

_____

_____

Choose one (for now) of the things you just identified and think about what it would take to increase your access to it. Suppose you decided you wanted to use this stress management strategy more. What are some challenges you might face?

_____

_____

_____

_____

What are some things you might do to minimize those barriers, if you decided to try using this stress management strategy more?

_____

_____

_____

_____

On a scale of 0–10, how IMPORTANT is it to you to increase your access to this stress management strategy? _____

What makes it that important, rather than a little less important?	**What could potentially happen that would make it MORE important?**
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

On a scale of 0–10, how CONFIDENT do you feel that, if you decided to increase your access to this stress management strategy, you could?

What makes you that confident, rather than a little less confident?	**What could potentially happen that would make you feel MORE confident?**
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Given all of that, what's one thing you will do TODAY that can move you just one step closer to being able to use this stress management strategy more?

_____

_____

_____

_____

turning off the offs

This worksheet is designed to help you create a practical plan for turning off the offs. The research suggests it's most effective when you repeat the four steps each day, but you can try doing it weekly, and even going through the exercise once would be great.

Step 1: Review your Sexy and Not-So-Sexy Contexts worksheets from chapter 3, where you identified the contexts that hit your brakes and activate your accelerator. Write a summary here:

Brakes

Accelerator

Step 2: All these brakes-hitting and accelerating-hitting contexts are your potential targets for change. Choose one that you could change if you decided to try turning off the offs. List five things you and/or your partner could take to implement this strategy. *Hint:* The more concrete and specific you are, the more useful this will be.

1. _____
   _____
2. _____
   _____
3. _____
   _____
4. _____
   _____
5. _____
   _____

Step 3: Anticipate barriers. What obstacles might you encounter?

Where and when—specifically—will this obstacle occur?

What could you do to prevent these obstacles?

What—specifically—will you do to get back to the goal if you face these obstacles?

Step 4: Think about what it would feel like to be a warm and erotic woman who is curious and playful about sex. What is it like? What else is true?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Some questions to consider:

- What strategies would you use to create more time for sex?
- What would give you more energy for sex?
- What aspects of your relationship would enhance sex?
- What challenges in your relationship would you like to overcome?
- What would your relationship with your body be like?
- How would you initiate sex?
- How would you respond when your partner initiated?
- What sexual cues would you notice?
- What kinds of thoughts would you have about sex?
- How do you feel about your partner's sexual arousal, desire, and orgasm?
- How would you feel about your own desire, arousal, and orgasm?
- How would you feel about giving pleasure?
- How would you feel about receiving pleasure?
- How would you manage the cultural shaming that some people would try to impose on you for being empowered and in control of your own body?
- What would be your favorite thing about your sexuality?

Examples:

- I can lose myself in my partner's touch and experience pleasure in the moment, without worrying about orgasm.
- I would think about the sexy and romantic interludes I've shared with my partner and let that build up my desire.
- I want sex even if we're arguing.
- All the doors and windows are open on my sexuality—I'm a big exuberant YES.
- I won't let anything get in the way of pleasure.
- I would allow myself to want what I want and not judge it.
- Exploring my sexuality is more exciting than scary.
- I would turn to sex and pleasure in times of distress.
- Sex isn't separate from the rest of my life—it's a part of my life, and my life is a part of it.
- There's no pressure to be or do anything that isn't 100 percent of what feels right to me.

appendix 1: therapeutic masturbation

If you are experiencing frustration around orgasm—whether you're learning to orgasm, learning to orgasm with a partner, or learning to have more control over your orgasms—I offer these instructions.

1. Find your clitoris (instructions in chapter 1).
2. Create a great context. You can use your worksheets from chapters 3 and 7 to help with this. In general, it'll be a context where you have no concern about being interrupted for about thirty minutes, where you feel safe and private and undistracted by outside worries.
3. Touch your body and notice how that feels. Touch your feet and legs and arms and hands and neck and scalp. At first, when you're learning to have an orgasm, stop here. Spend your thirty minutes just doing this. Do it a few times a week for a couple weeks. Gradually incorporate your breasts, lower abdomen, inner thighs.
4. Now stimulate your clitoris indirectly. The most indirect stimulation is simply to think about your clitoris. Just give it quiet, loving attention. Try rocking or rotating your hips, to bring your attention to your pelvis. You may or may not notice some emotions emerging as you attend to your clitoris. That's normal. Allow those feelings and practice feeling affectionate and compassionate toward yourself, your genitals, and all those feelings.

   When you feel ready (and you may not feel ready for days or weeks—that's okay), move to "distal" stimulation, which means indirect, roundabout stimulation. Try any of these, or whatever else feels right:

- Gently pinch your labia between your thumbs and forefingers, stretch the labia out, and tug from side to side. This will put very indirect pressure on the clitoris and move the skin over the clitoris (the clitoral hood).
- With your palm over your mons, press down a little and pull upward, toward your abdomen. Again, this will put gentle pressure on the clit and move the skin around it. Try different pressures, different speeds of tugging (e.g., one long slow tug, several quick tugs in a row), or rotating your palm in a circle.
- Place your palms against your inner thighs, so that the outside edges of your thumbs are pressing against your labia, possibly even squeezing them together. Rock your hips against the pressure of your hands.

Some people prefer indirect stimulation over direct stimulation. You may notice as you try these techniques that the muscles in your arms, legs, butt, and/or abdomen get tense. That's a normal part of the arousal process. You might even find yourself feeling like you don't want to stop doing a particular kind of stimulation. I humbly suggest you go with your gut; don't stop. Keep going for as long as it feels good, just keep paying attention to the pleasurable sensations without trying to change them or even understand them.

5. Try direct stimulation. For most people this is pleasurable only when arousal has already started up, so once you're feeling pretty pleasurable and warm, try any of these:

- With the flat of one or two or three fingertips, lightly touch the head of the clitoris with a steady back-and-forth motion. Try slow, fast, anything in between that feels good, and with light, brushing touch, light pressure, deep pressure . . . try different combinations of speeds and pressures.
- With as many fingertips as feels comfortable, rub circles directly over your clitoris—fast or slow, light touch or deep pressure, or anything in between.
- Again with varying numbers of fingers, and with different pressures and speeds, tug upward on the clitoris, from the clitoral hood.
- With whatever variation on fingers, speed, and pressure you want to try, flick upward from just under the head of the clitoris.

As your arousal level changes, notice and observe what happens to your body. Don't try to make it change. If you notice that your brain starts whirring away at anxieties or fears, notice that, too, know that you can worry about all that some other time, release those thoughts, and return your attention to the sensations inside your body.

6. Keep breathing. As you experience sexual pleasure, your muscles will contract, and often people find themselves holding their breath or breathing more shallowly. Periodically check in with your breathing, relax your abdominal muscles, and allow yourself to breathe.

   Don't try to make anything happen, just allow yourself to notice what it feels like and let your body do what it wants. If you feel worried that you're losing control of your body, relax into that fear, reassure yourself that you're safe, know that you can stop anytime you choose. And of course, if it gets to be too much, feel free to stop anytime you like. The more you keep going, the more the pleasure and tension will spread through your body, and it will cross some intense threshold, and explode . . . eventually.

If you're learning to orgasm with a partner, do all of this alone for a week (or three), then do it with a photo of your partner sitting beside you. Do that for a week (or three). Then do it with your beloved partner on the phone or in the next room. Then with them in the room but far away, in the dark, blindfolded, and facing the other way. Gradually increase their proximity and even the light.

Once you're orgasming with your partner on the bed with you, begin showing what feels good to you—you can even use some variation on the exercise described in the previous chapter, for couples with desire differences. Move your partner's hands on your body to show what you like.

And always, notice if you're getting frustrated and remember that you are already at the goal state: pleasure.

appendix 2: extended orgasm

Extending and expanding your orgasms is a kind of meditation. If you've never meditated in nonsexual ways, it might be easiest if you begin by practicing outside the context of sexuality. Here's how.

Begin with a simple breathing exercise like the one I describe in the spectatoring section.

Inhale through your nose for five seconds.

Then exhale through your mouth for ten seconds.

Do that eight times, for a total of two minutes.

As you breathe, your mind will wander to other things. That is normal and healthy! The point is not to prevent your mind from wandering but to notice when that happens, let those thoughts go for the moment, and gently return your attention to your breathing.

The breathing is good for you, but the noticing that your mind wandered and returning your attention to your breath is the crucial skill.

Do this every day, and gradually you'll notice yourself noticing what you're paying attention to all the time. Once that's happening spontaneously, you're ready to begin moving toward extended orgasm.

When you're ready, create a context where you have lots of time on your own (or with your partner) without interruption or distraction. You'll need an hour or two—and if you're thinking, "I don't have an hour or two to have an orgasm," that's totally fair! Extended orgasm is the sex equivalent of running a marathon. You can be as healthy as anyone needs to be and never run a marathon. Just jog a few times a week, that's great! But sometimes you have the opportunity to set an ambitious goal and dedicate some time and attention to it.

Whether it's a marathon or ecstasy, it's always a choice you make, depending on what fits your life.

So. Create a context. And begin with the breathing exercise for two minutes, practicing returning your attention to your breath when it strays.

Then begin a little sensory exploration, paying attention to how your body feels, using all the techniques in the therapeutic masturbation approach (appendix 1).

Imagine that arousal happens on a scale of 0–10, where 0 is no arousal and 10 is orgasm. Start at 0 and allow your arousal to grow up to 5, which is definitely turned on, definitely interested.

Then back down to 1. Allow the tension in your muscles to dissipate.

Go up to 6, and then back down to 2.

Of course, as you go through this process, notice when your attention strays to outside thoughts, let those thoughts go, and return your attention to the sensations of your body. And don't forget to breathe.

Up to 7, down to 3.

7 is pretty aroused. By the time you get to 7, your body may become reluctant to stop moving toward orgasm. This is where the crucial skill of taking your foot off the accelerator without putting it on the brake comes in. Just turn off the ons without turning on the offs. Allow your muscles to relax, allow the arousal to dissipate softly.

Up to 8, down to 4.

Up to 9, down to 5.

9 is a very, very high level of arousal, and your body is very much on the train at this point. It wants to move forward to its destination. So it may be difficult, on your first attempts, to relax your abdominal, thigh, and buttock muscles enough to ease your arousal down. When you do, you may experience a kind of spreading warmth or tingling. Whereas fast orgasms are generally focused right in the genitals, these slower orgasms spread out over your whole body. Let that happen.

Still notice when your thoughts stray and return your attention to the sensations in your body.

Up to 9½, down to 6.

9½ is the bittersweet screaming edge of orgasm. At first, it may be you find it difficult to take pressure off the accelerator. Feel free not to the first few times you try this—the worst that can happen is you'll have an orgasm!

But once you learn the knack, allow your arousal to reach 6, go back to 9½, then down to 7.

You'll need to make a deliberate effort to ease tension away from your abdomen, buttocks, and thigh muscles, because that tension can push you over the edge. As you relax, you'll sense the arousal spreading from your genitals, radiating into the rest of your body.

Back to 9½, down to 8.

Back to 9½, down to 9. By now, you're constantly hovering around orgasm, holding yourself at the peak sexual tension your body can contain. That's extended orgasm. Congratulations! With practice, you can stay there as long as you like, as long as your body can sustain, always noticing what you're paying attention to and gently nudging your attention toward your body sensations. You're a bit like a bathtub at this point, where the tension is trickling into you at exactly the same rate that it's going out. If it begins to trickle just a little bit more quickly than it's going out, you'll cross the threshold and release. If it begins to drain just a bit more quickly than it's trickling in, you'll drift away from the peak. There is no such thing as failure here, only different kinds of success, because it's all intense pleasure.

This whole process might take forty-five minutes or an hour, and there will be Feelings, make no mistake. And even if you don't have an extended orgasm, you'll still have loads of pleasure!

The great thing about ecstatic pleasure is that it cannot coexist with shame, stress, fear, anger, bitterness, rage, or exhaustion. Practicing ecstasy is practicing living outside all of those things, learning how to release them. It's as good for you as vegetables, jogging, sleep, and breathing.